


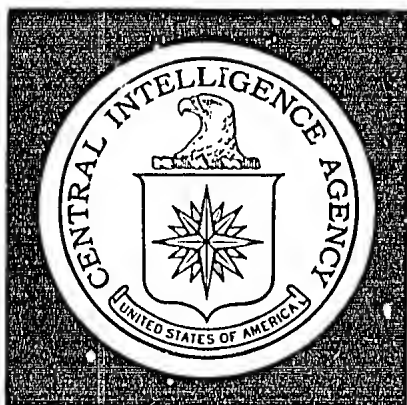
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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

WEEKLY SUMMARY

Special Report

Belgium Seeks Political Equilibrium

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Belgium Seeks Political Equilibrium

Belgian politics in the past ten months has seen the culmination of efforts to resolve the historic tensions between the nation's Dutch- and French-speaking citizens. Skillfully led by Prime Minister Gaston Eyskens, the coalition of his Social Christian Party with the Socialist Party finally achieved a basic revision of Belgium's constitution and enacted the enabling legislation. The revisions in part simply formalize existing practices, but they also establish a legal basis for decentralization in cultural affairs plus new institutional relations between the linguistic communities. These measures promise a period of domestic tranquility, but they may also bring further loss of national identity and continued political disarray. The government takes the position that the "New Belgium" will be in keeping with the evolution of a regionalized European federation.

The confident Socialists led by ambitious leaders have used disagreements over intracoalition compromises to force Eyskens to call national elections before the holiday season. The election is scheduled for 7 November. It will not significantly affect the implementation of constitutional revision. On the other hand, it will provide a measure of public sentiment, particularly in Brussels, toward the Eyskens program as well as an indication of the future development of the country's badly fragmented and anachronistic party system.

Flemish-Walloon Rivalry

Belgium, which came into being after the 1830 revolution, is in some respects an artificial creation. It has had deep-seated divisions, somewhat obscured by the dominant and centralizing role of the French language and the political-cultural elite which spoke it. In spite of its predominance in the body politic, three well-defined cleavages—relating to religion, politics, and culture—eventually produced tensions. Disputes between Catholics and Liberals concerning the secularization of education and the rise of class politics with the socialist movement provided severe tests of the survivability of the Belgian state. Resolution of the volatile issues of clericalism and socialism finally came when the School Pact of 1958 provided equal funding for both free and public schools and when a rising standard of

living defused latent revolutionary impulses among the working class. There remained to tax the ingenuity of the country's leaders the country's ancient conflict between Dutch-speaking Flemings and French-speaking Walloons.

A growing demographic imbalance favorable to the Flemings, the economic resurgence of Flanders, and the maturation of Flemish self-consciousness in cultural life have in this century prompted piecemeal efforts to satisfy Flemish desires for equal status in public life with the Francophones. Governments passed legislation, primarily during the interbellum period, officially recognizing and extending the use of Dutch in administration, in primary and intermediate education, in the judiciary, and in the armed forces. A series of acts in 1962-63 fixed the linguistic frontier between Flanders and Wallonia

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Prime Minister Eyskens

any further Frenchification of the capital. In order to preserve the linguistic boundaries, the acts decreed that the capital's six largely French-speaking suburban communes would remain under Flemish jurisdiction. These measures only partially alleviated the situation. Intercommunal animosity and accompanying political disarray continued.

Constitutional Revision

For the past three years, Prime Minister Eyskens' coalition government has tried to reconcile the two linguistic communities through constitutional revision, a difficult task demanding a two-thirds majority of both houses of Parliament. A series of extraparlimentary committees commissioned by the Lefebvre-Spaak government between 1962 and 1965 had drafted numerous and detailed proposals for revision, many of

"As the nationalism of each state tends to dwindle, as each country experiences a growing need to become integrated in larger entities, we are witnessing a corresponding revival of regionalist views which nineteenth-century unitarian policies had succeeded in stifling."

Belgian Prime Minister
Pierre Harmel (July 1965)

and stipulated that these areas were unilingual in virtually all respects. The capital city of Brussels, which is 85 percent French speaking but completely surrounded by Flemish communes, acquired bilingual status along with a system of inspection rigorously enforcing educational instruction for children in the language spoken at home. This system basically sought to prevent

which Eyskens has incorporated into his own program. However, the appearance after the 1965 elections of extremist parties espousing federalist and even separatist sentiments and the famous 132-day governmental crisis over the linguistic status of the University of Louvain in early 1968 completely undermined efforts to obtain a two-thirds majority for constitutional revision. These developments, particularly the failure of the tripartite Round Table meetings of 1964-65, revealed that the linguistic cleavages, unlike the country's religious and social cleavages, had never been translated into clear-cut differences of position among the political parties. With each of the three traditional parties having linguistic factions, as well as regional and ideological factions, compromises were next to impossible.

In the wake of the bitter crisis over the University of Louvain and the subsequent transfer of its French-speaking faculty to Wallonia, the linguistic extremists—the Flemish Volksunie and the two Francophone groups—scored major gains in the March 1968 elections at the expense of the established parties. The prospects appeared bleak that the incoming Senate and Chamber, which had a mandate for constitutional reform, would be able to bring it about, since this task seemingly could be accomplished only by a very unlikely tripartite coalition of the weakened traditional parties. Eyskens' two-party coalition came into being in late June 1968: with 127 seats it was 15 seats short of a two-thirds majority. Nevertheless, Eyskens proceeded to draft a package of constitutional amendments and a program decentralizing decision-making within the national Economic Planning Bureau. The former aimed at satisfying the Flemish desire for *de jure* recognition of equal legal and social status. Revision, among other things, would provide for "cultural autonomy," an intricate system of institutional arrangements protecting the cultural and political prerogatives of each linguistic community. The creation of three regional economic councils (including one for Brussels) was intended, on the other hand, as a concession to the Walloons, who had long believed something of that nature was

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required to combat their region's economic decay.

Brussels: Lebensraum or a tache d'huile

Eyskens, a Flemish Catholic, hoped that carefully balanced concessions to both linguistic communities would assure passage of his package. For the next two years, the government solicited the support of opposition parties, particularly the Volksunie and Flemish Liberals, but to no avail. After being forced to redraft its proposals in the spring of 1970, the government finally succeeded in enacting the economic decentralization bill, for which only a simple majority was required. Parliament also reached substantial agreement on most of the constitutional revisions. These floundered in the Senate on 25 June, when 20 Volksunie deputies and 45 French-speakers (primarily Socialists and Liberals from Brussels) boycotted the proceedings. The dispute over the territorial definition of Brussels precipitated the crisis. Militant Flemings, who regarded the capital as an expanding oil spot in Flemish territory, had demanded an amendment specifying that the capital consisted of only the 19 central urban communes defined in the 1962-63 linguistic laws. In turn, the French-speakers denounced attempts to restrict the natural demographic and economic growth of "their" city. Lacking the votes for revision and with the summer vacation approaching, parliament disbanded.

The ensuing stalemate produced dissatisfaction in all quarters and threatened the tenuous coalition government. Flemings and Francophones traded vilifications. With constitutional revision in limbo, attention gradually turned toward the sexennial communal elections scheduled for 11 October. The coalition partners, particularly the Socialists, polled surprisingly well in their regional strongholds and held the gains of the Volksunie and the Walloon Rally to a minimum. As usual, Brussels presented a different picture. Nine groups campaigned in the capital but only one, a bilingual slate of candidates under former prime minister Vanden Boeynants, sup-

ported Eyskens' program. The people responded by giving the Francophone Democratic Front and like-minded Liberals and Socialists 72 percent of their votes. The former alone garnered nearly a third of the vote. Flemish fears, however, subsided when formal alliances of French-speakers failed to materialize. The Liberals in Brussels had suffered grievously, losing 65 communal seats, but the national leadership was not inclined to tarnish the party's traditional image further by allowing its Brussels wing to affiliate with French-speaking extremists. Likewise, the Socialist Party's national organization pressed Henri Simonet and his Brussels Socialists to negotiate with Eyskens in order to facilitate constitutional revision.

The government reacted moderately to its political defeat in Brussels. Eyskens, who had threatened resignation, undertook a series of consultations with various parties. While his talks with Simonet proved fruitless, his decision to engage in them was courageous, considering the pressure on him from the Flemish wing of his own party and the Flemish press to avoid any concessions.

Revision Attained

In the following weeks, Eyskens achieved a surprising breakthrough with the Walloon Liberals. A general fear within the badly battered Liberal Party that new elections would be called greatly assisted him. Moreover, he effectively utilized the estrangement of the Walloon (and Flemish) Liberals from their Brussels colleagues. In reintroducing his program to Parliament on 19 November, he directed his criticism at the "Brussels egoists" and not at the representatives from Wallonia. Among the latter, national Liberal president Pierre Deschamps was personally favorable to proposals granting Wallonia more protection and leverage in the national institutions.

Actually, several concessions split the ranks of French-speaking opposition. Most important, Eyskens promised the Liberals not to call

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Chamber of Representatives

Party	Flemish Linguistic Group		Francophone Linguistic Group		
	Flanders	Brussels	Brussels	Wallonia	
Social Christian	45	5	4	14	— 68
Socialist	27	2	5	25	— 59
Liberal	17	2	5	21	— 45
Flemish Nationalist (Volkunie)	18	2	—	—	— 20
Francophone Democratic Front and Walloon Rally (FDF-RW)	—	—	6	7	— 13
Communist	—	1	—	4	— 5
Maverick Liberals	—	—	1	1	— 2
	107	12	21	72	212

Present coalition government

Linguistic parties

Potential anti-government Francophone alliance in Brussels

Henri Simonet's Independent Brussels Socialists

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elections for one year. He also agreed to restore the *liberté* to the capital before the next school year. The *liberté*, abrogated by the 1962-63 linguistic laws, allowed the head of the family freely to choose the language of instruction for his children. Lastly, Eyskens suggested that the proposal limiting Brussels to the 19 central communes would not be included in the constitution. Although these last two concessions raised Flemish ire, the metropolitan limits of Brussels were secured in a crucial passage which strongly implied identification of the six peripheral communes with Flemish territory. After marathon sessions, the Chamber passed the proposed revisions on 10 December and the Senate followed suit eight days later.

The New Look

The new look of the constitution is less national and more regional than before. Various articles officially recognize the legitimacy of existing subdivisions. Belgium now has four linguistic regions, three geographical areas, and three cultural communities. Any change in the linguistic boundaries or in the authority of regional institutions will require an "extraordinary majority," i.e., two thirds of each house and a simple majority in each linguistic group within each house. These amendments, primarily intended to dispel Flemish anxiety, provide new forms of legal identity and status for the linguistic groups.

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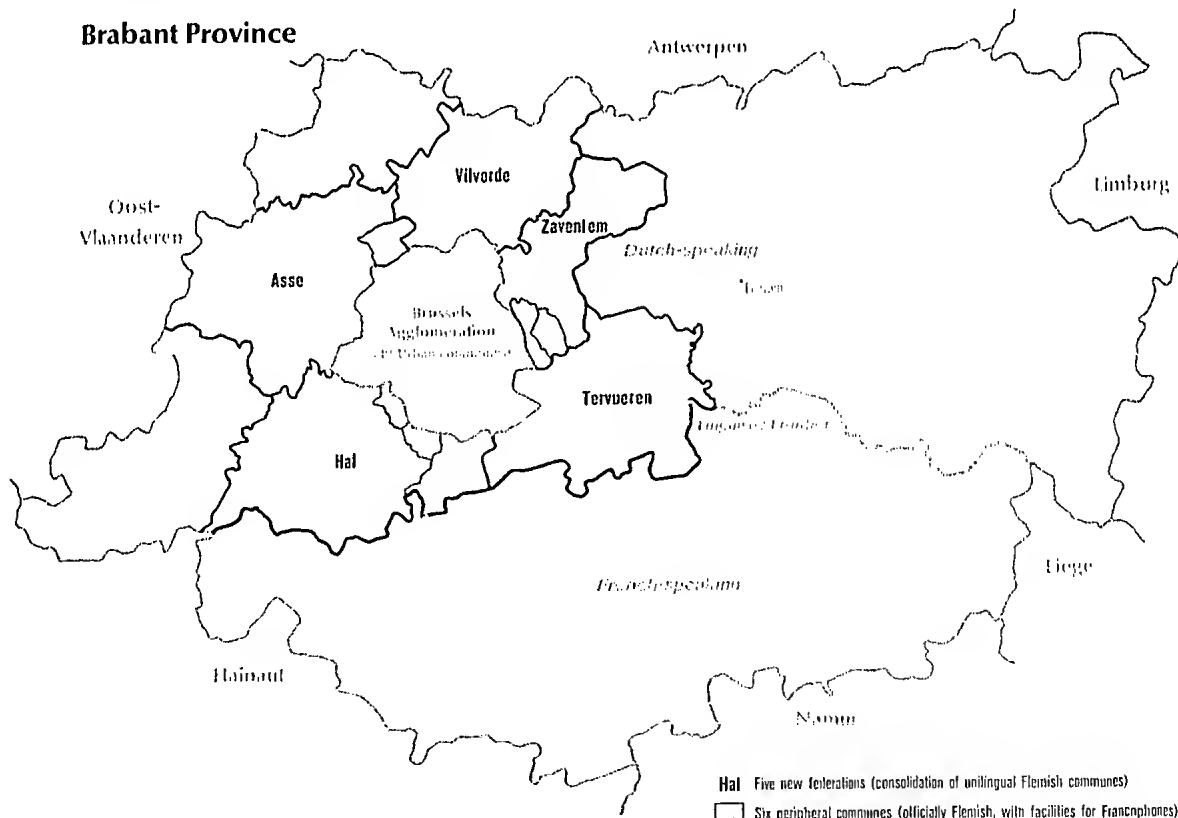
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Four essential principles underlie the revisions—linguistic parity in executive bodies, linguistic groups in legislative bodies, corresponding suspensive veto power, and cultural autonomy. The operation of these principles will bring real changes to political life in Belgium.

Except for the prime minister and the capital's president, equal numbers of Flemings and Francophones must sit in the national cabinet and in Brussels' new executive body, the *collège*. The new constitution also decrees the formal division of Parliament and Brussels' urban council into French- and Dutch-speaking groups. Each group, on both the national and municipal levels, may suspend legislation for 30 days if three fourths of its members deem such legislation detrimental to

its interests. The cabinet and Brussels' *collège*, however, retain the responsibility for final judgment. These institutional arrangements will serve to protect the linguistic minorities—Dutch-speakers in Brussels, French-speakers in the country at large.

As for cultural autonomy, the constitution provides for the creation of French and Dutch national cultural councils and corresponding committees for culture in the Brussels area. Each council or committee will have exclusive jurisdiction over its community's cultural affairs and enjoy broad regulatory powers over educational matters and the use of languages. These bodies will either be identical to or elected by their respective linguistic groups in Parliament and the Brussels urban council.



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Brussels: An Equilibrium?

These provisions aim at establishing inter-communal equilibrium on the regional level and in Brussels. For the sake of this aim, the political leaders of the Flemish and Walloon communities were willing to sacrifice the interests of Brussels' French-speakers by creating an undemocratic municipal structure as well as restricting legally its territory. While the capital's legislative council will be overwhelmingly French speaking, the Flemings will enjoy parity in the twelve-man *collège*. The disproportionate suspensive power awarded to the council's minuscule Flemish group only compounds the inequity. Although they represent only a third of the population, the Flemings will also have 12 of the 15 seats on the committee governing intercity affairs for Greater Brussels.

More importantly, Eyskens' program modernizing municipal and local administration will integrate the capital's six suburban Francophone communes into five new federations dominated by strictly unilingual Flemish communes. This exercise in gerrymandering will effectively isolate the 19 urban communes from Wallonia. The restoration of the *liberté* can therefore hardly be regarded as sufficient compensation to the French-speaking majority.

The Pangs of Implementation

During the first half of this year, fears of French-speakers concerning these and related matters hampered Eyskens' attempts to pass enabling legislation. Ironically, the constitutional amendment establishing the "extraordinary majority" made the situation particularly acute. In order to enact legislation pertaining to the new cultural institutions, Eyskens needed a simple majority of the Flemish and Francophone groups in both houses as well as an over-all two thirds majority. His program was endangered because he was very unlikely to gain a simple majority on the French side of the Chamber. The Chamber was dominated by opposition parties such as the

Liberals, Simonet's Brussels Socialists, and the Francophone Democratic Front. All Eyskens' proposals—municipal reorganization, the *liberté*, and cultural autonomy—were inextricably inter-related. Each in some way depended on the others. Since the prime minister had staked his reputation on the restoration of the *liberté* by 1 September, a defeat on the other measures, particularly cultural autonomy, would have ended his coalition.

While these proposals languished in parliamentary committees in June, Eyskens met with Deschamps and the Liberals, looking for support. He was unable to satisfy the Liberals. The party, except for its Brussels wing, wanted a system of proportional representation for the new metropolitan councils. Most importantly, Flemish Liberals sought a "cultural pact," fashioned along the lines of the School Pact, to protect nonlinguistic minorities from discrimination. Eyskens regarded such a pact as superfluous, the relevant constitutional amendment being a sufficient guarantee of minority rights in his view.

The Liberals' demands however strained the cohesion of the coalition. The Socialists, particularly those from Flanders, began to recognize that proposals for cultural autonomy and a system of majority representation might, if enacted, seriously disadvantage Socialist office holders. Thus, a strange if tacit convergence of views emerged between the Liberals and Flemish Socialists. Each feared losing representation under those circumstances on the urban and cultural councils. Their leaders were obsessed with the idea that they could lose control of the patronage and finances dispensed to these bodies by the central authorities.

Nevertheless, drawing on Volksunie support, Eyskens was able to squeeze the project on cultural autonomy through the Senate. Commitment to restore the *liberté* and fear of new elections kept the coalition intact. With only five days remaining on the parliamentary calendar, Eyskens still needed Liberal votes in the Chamber's

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French-speaking section. He had virtually no room to maneuver. Since Deschamp's Liberals refused to compromise and his own Socialist colleagues were becoming increasingly restive, Eyskens agreed on 15 July to establish proportional representation nationwide and committed his government to negotiate a cultural pact during the next parliamentary session. These concessions were a small price to pay, for with Liberal support the prime minister succeeded in enacting his whole legislative package before the summer recess.

Socialists Seek Victory

The passage of Eyskens' program enormously increases his prestige and underscores the viability of the democratic process in Belgium. For the first time in several years, members of Parliament expected to concentrate on economic issues during the fall session this year. With only two weeks before the reconvention of Parliament, however, Eyskens on 24 September agreed to dissolve both chambers and call national elections for 7 November, seven months ahead of schedule. Although he blamed this snap decision on the international monetary situation, he was in fact reacting to the intensification of political maneuvering already under way. During the past month, the prime minister was unable to maintain cohesion even within his own party. The Flemish wing, backed by the Flemish press, indicated an unwillingness to act this fall upon legislation most desired by the Socialists—the cultural pact, the institution of regional economic bodies, and a special bill aimed at resolving the disputed situation in the Fourons, six bilingual communes along the country's eastern linguistic frontier. Along with the *liberté*, Eyskens had promised these measures to the Socialists and the opposition Liberals in return for their support of constitutional revision. The government's continued existence depended in large measure on the fulfillment of the bargain.

Moreover, the politically confident Walloon Socialists had in fact been eager to test their

strength before the holiday season. Competition between Edmund Leburton, party co-president, and Andre Cools, Belgium's vice premier, for the position of the next prime minister has propelled the party in this direction. Throughout the summer the intensely ambitious Leburton criticized party action in compromising with Eyskens' Social Christians. On the eve of a top-level coalition meeting his inflammatory remarks about the Social Christians precipitated the crisis. Leburton's action was primarily tactical and not rooted in any opposition to Eyskens' program. One of Belgium's best-known secrets is Leburton's desire to head a Socialist-Liberal coalition. He has carefully cultivated relations with Liberal President Deschamps and has even taken quiet soundings elsewhere.



Edmund Leburton
Minister for Economic Affairs

Although constitutional revision has been completed, the intrusion of national elections will undoubtedly complicate the implementation of cultural autonomy. The *liberté* has already been restored in Brussels, but the institution of the cultural councils, scheduled for 1 December, will probably be delayed. Other items, such as the cultural pact and the renewal of the School Pact will also be placed in limbo.

Regionalization and Fragmentation

Eyskens' success in achieving constitutional revision was due in large measure to a decline in political tensions and demonstrations, at least in Flanders and Wallonia over the linguistic issue. This trend is reflected in setbacks the Walloon Rally and Volksunie suffered in communal by-elections this summer, presaging further losses for these one-issue regional parties in the upcoming national elections. The Volksunie has in fact

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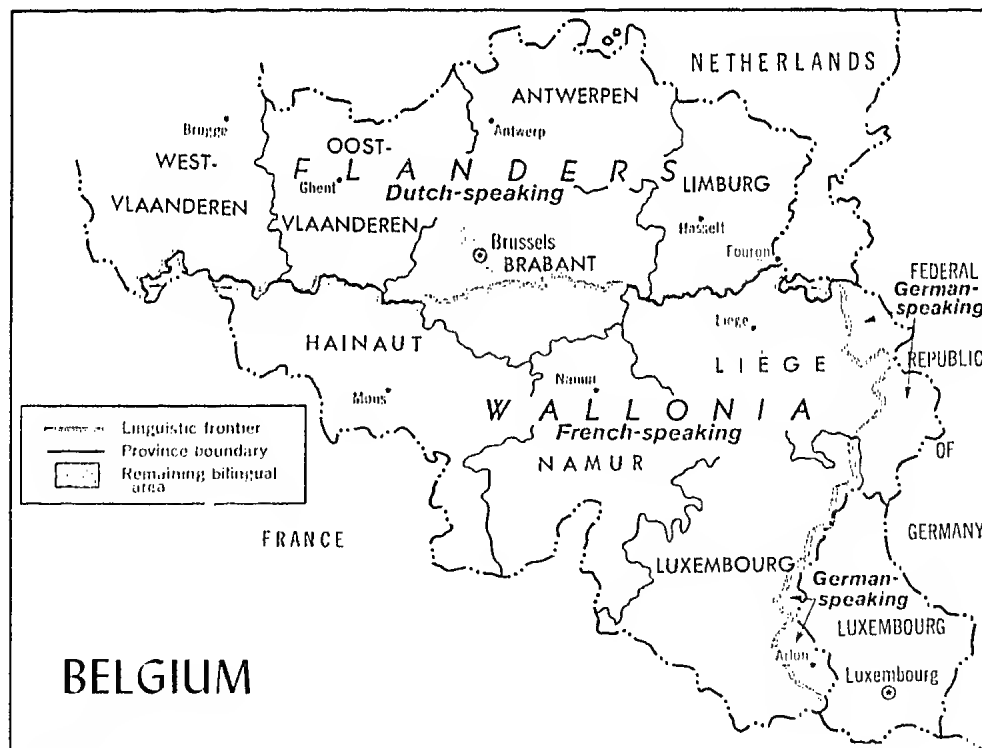
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begun to formulate a more progressive social image to try to maintain voter appeal.

On the other hand, the new institutional arrangements which emphasize linguistic identity do nothing for the unity of the traditional parties. Their regionalization continues unabated. For the past few years, the Social Christians have officially functioned as two separate parties, Flemish and Walloon. The Socialists at their last congress elected co-presidents representing each linguistic community. The Liberals formally reorganized into three regional groups this summer, the compromises between the Walloon Liberals and Eyskens having deepened the fissures within the party. A recent pre-electoral alliance between the Brussels Liberals and the Francophone Democratic Front has exacerbated the situation. No semblance of unity remains in the very party that

has long prided itself on its "Belgian" character. Differing political philosophies and religious affiliations will probably prevent a realignment of the liberal factions with other parties on a linguistic basis and may undermine Leburton's efforts to form a Socialist-Liberal coalition.

For Brussels, much depends on next spring's municipal elections. To repay the sacrifice of the city's interests by "indifferent" Walloon politicians and the government, a French-speaking front in power with or without Simonet's Socialists could sabotage the new municipal machinery. This political isolation of Brussels looks like the weakest point in Eyskens' "New Belgium." The city could easily become a powder keg in the national elections if the French-speakers' resentment intensifies.



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The functioning of the central government, which already has four dual ministries for Flanders and Wallonia, will actually be changed little by the constitutional revision. Although decision making is more decentralized, the government does retain final authority over the cultural councils and Parliament's linguistic groups. Coalition stability will be more at the mercy of intraparty factions than ever, and this can easily hamstring domestic legislation in Parliament. There are proposals to prohibit executive action and require full parliamentary ratification of each international agreement undertaken by Belgium in the future. If this is done, regional anxieties could affect foreign relations and perhaps complicate Belgium's position with the European Communities.

While federalization has supposedly resolved the question of national identity, the Belgians still have to concern themselves with such trivialities

as linguistic parity in positions and promotions within the Belgian Army and Foreign Ministry. Moreover, it is questionable whether an intensified provincialism can be accommodated by the present "European" institutions. For example, several aspects of the educational system in suburban communes of Brussels clearly conflict with rulings by the European Court of Human Rights, which favor French-speaking residents. The new Flemish cultural council may, of course, choose to defy these supranational rulings. A legitimization of parochial interests could thus run counter to the "new Europe." The government nevertheless portrays its policies as being consonant with the spirit of West European integration. Coalition leaders as well as articulate members of the nation's political elite believe that the weakening of Belgium's political unity and identity will be no great loss, particularly in the long run. They envision the "New Belgium" as a step toward the gradual emergence of a regionalized and federated Europe.

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